Can you see your eyes that see? Yes, but it is not you.

Identity and difference in *Discourse, Figure:* Jean Francois Lyotard, Giulio Paolini, Lorenzo Lotto

(and you)

Limiting ourselves to perception means accessing the world as a text to be read. It is the eye that juxtaposes the pine and the maple in the "sylvan text", or in a desire only momentarily appeased. If a text can be identified by sitting at a table in the recognition of linguistic identity and unity, standing in representation means to seek out the plasticity of events: the libidinal clashes of figural limits, the release of latches of edges. A sensorial horizon that differs from the tapestry of perception. While "the figural" in the arts refers to the western aesthetic theory of art, in the function of the figure, that is, in representation, for Lyotard this function is not signified: it is a function around and in the figure, at once without and within. Yet, is it possible to recuperate the Other into the Same? In Lyotard's account, the figural appears precisely in the resistance to such recuperation, where "the figural" is in riot with representation, vertical separation and oppositional systematisation. One enters the figure through language where *it* can encounter *self* in *itself* but only as a transgression: the artwork stands at the limit of this discourse.

Phenomenology is committed to such recuperation, to the figural becoming an event in the visual field. This is what the scientist wants to understand and fails: to return ideas to appearance, to return the eye to the "savage state." Yet perception, as Merleau Ponty reads, is already structured in a delay: it is diachronic. "Perception is not an innate faculty, but a process of temporalisation between bodily rhythms, figuration threads and sensorial horizons that are non-essentialist,

relational and diacritical."[1] There is always a gap which is the diachronical negotiation of sensing and sensible. As Stiegler writes: "If I speak and you listen to me, it's because I am not in absolute synchrony with you; but if I can speak to you, it is because my diachrony tends to synchronise with you. Language is the articulation of the diachronic and the synchronic, that is, the composition of two tendencies that are also forces, a composition that produces a dynamic process."[2] This gap — an ecárt — the "back side" of perception opens to *le grand dehor*, *le dehor absolute*: while hardening *Buildungs* into *Gestalten*, remains non-coincidental as a dynamism of rhythms. Perception remains always perception *of* something.

In Plato knowledge is difference: the intelligible appears within the sensible in a hierarchical structure that allows the distinction of figures and backgrounds, interiority and exteriority; subjects and objects thus become the origin of Phenomenology, its conditions. Knowledge consists in grasping the movement from sensible to intelligible, a movement that ultimately grounds the sensible itself; later, with Kant, it becomes the condition of its possibility: not the way human knowledge comes to experience the world, but the conditions by which the world becomes experienceable by human knowledge. This movement occurring in perception turns out to be an intuition — that of the projection of each ray towards the sensible and the manifold. The sensible becomes the medium of intelligibility — until reflection renders it visible: a dream becomes a dream only once woke up, water is air to the fish, a palm tree falling produces sound for the listener. For Merleau-Ponty knowledge emerges from the sensible, as an "a priori" of perception: *we learn to*

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[1] A. Al-Saji, *"A Past Which Has Never Been Present": Bergsonian Dimensions in Merleau-Ponty's Theory of the Prepersonal. Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2008
[2] B. Stiegler, *To Love, To Love Me, To Love Us: From September 11 to April 21*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011, p. 39

perceive. Even if sensibility appears in a chiasmic relationship with *le grand dehor*, it does not escape a structural hierarchy. In Plato, art is a shadow of a shadow, staging a double ecárt: the sensible and multiple are relegated to representation, while the intelligible possess unity and uniqueness. In *Discourse, Figure,* Lyotard displaces precisely this structure. Difference as a relationship is a passage named by discourse: we name what is a shadow. The author defines it as the bias of discourse: the figure cannot be reduced to what it signifies without remainder. This is the "double exteriority": not an unbearable gap, as in Plato and Merleau Ponty — "nothing is more monotonous and individual than ineffability"[3] — but a transgressive excess. There is an exteriority that is interior to language and an interiority which is exterior to language: they are libidinal, disruptive events. Truth comes here into discourse displacing the dialect of light, with its rays and reflections, configuring thus in *the capacity of disturbance* within the order of knowledge. It consists of a noise introduction, glitches in the production of normative systems of differentiation. Truth as disturbance of the very function of the figure, as presence in the ecárt: silence is an horizon that makes language possible — there would be no reason to speak or no desire to speak, no interval between inhale and exhale, waking and sleep, no diachronical delay. Truth cannot be located through the coordinates of knowledge, as it is "like a dislocated body whereupon speech impresses fragments that can be arranged in various surface configurations"[4]: their presence is called expression, but not all expressions are truth. If signifiers emerge in the finite and transparent space through measured intervals, meanings are plastic expenses of condensation, displacements and distortions. Difference does not oppose *truth* to *falsity;* it differentiates between expressive intensities. The decline of phenomenology consists in giving up on the fallacy of unity, on the

[3] P. Virno, *Notes on the General Intellect*, in *Historical Materialism*, Volume 15, Issue 3, 2007, pp. 3-8
[4] J.F. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011, p. 13

phantasy of origins whereby the event absorbs in the eventness, where the eye is placed at the beginning. Representation, determination and identification consist of extractivists practices of absorption of the Other into the Same. "This body is not a privileged place for disturbance."[5] "The event as disturbance is what always defines knowledge, with challenging knowledge articulated in discourse and by shattering the quasi-comprehension of the body itself, putting it out of tune from itself and from things, as an emotion:" [6] it is desire. As *truly* unacceptable desire has its rejection embedded into *it-self*, which one cannot but pretend to accept, for accepting is still rejecting it: desire is the pleasure that comes without the satisfaction of the function, where the figure, detached from the function itself, disengaged from any perception, unfastened to any gazes, simply *appears*.

"To constitute a visible object is to be able to lose it. This virtuality of this lack, which remains present in the actuality of the thing, is represented in discourse by the *not*. Here a path begins to appear"[7]; "there is nothing to see without distance, without the separation between seer and the visible, nothing to paint if I cannot remove myself from the game the world plays on my body"[8]; "the picture is such an inefficient trompe l'oeil that it requires the eye to access the truth, and it is, in a sense, nothing more than a call to the eye to be acknowledged. (...), the eye takes back from it the right it had given up in order to allow the picture to be: the right to believe itself the place from which the world-even in the process of manifesting itself is seen manifesting itself, manifests its manifestation."[9]

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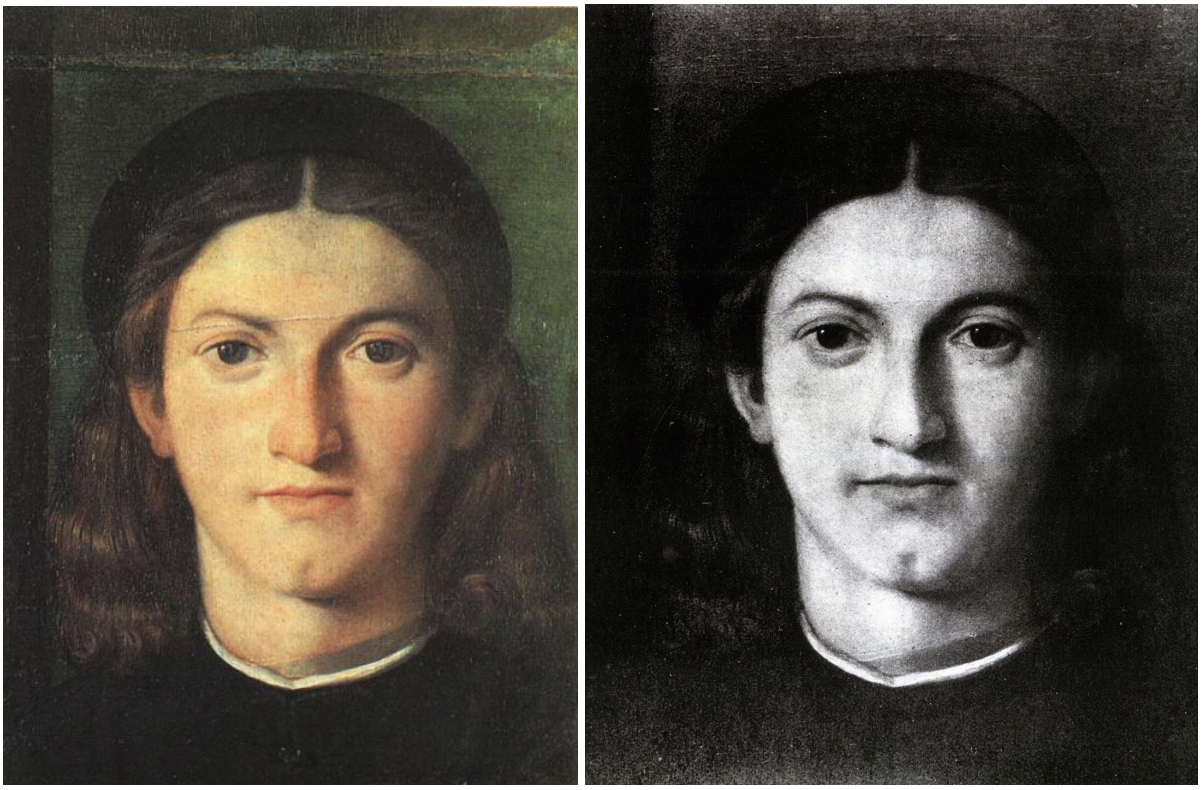
[5] J. F. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011, p. 17
[6] *Ibidem,* p. 18
[7] *Ibidem,* p. 25
[8] *Ibidem,*p. 28
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 28



Lorenzo Lotto, *Giovane*. 1506, oil on painting, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence
Giulio Paolini, *Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto*. 1967, photography, Fondazione Giulio e Anna Paolini, Turin

If negation is the acknowledgment of what is repressed, the anonymous viewer becomes visible precisely via non-identification with author and artist Giulio Paolini. The practice of gazing unfolds what the "no" negates as absently designated. It never coincides with what it speaks of, yet it is in this non-identity that breaks through. The announcement of this breaking is an expression, the transgression of the rules of identity in their function of determination and representation. The loss of the object, no longer in opposition to a subject, becomes the very condition of representation. The object emerges as the locality where gazes are only coordinates of a space-time orientation, of tropism, where negativity is intentional: the "I" of the viewer is the bridge between Lorenzo Lotto and Giulio Paolini. It is a cross over of centuries where places, years and people, still hesitant at the thresholds of forms and memory, meet unrelated without collapsing into unity. This

distance is internally maintained in the discourse of the title: *Giovane che guarda Lorenzo Lotto (Young man looking at Lorenzo Lotto)*. Is it a self-portrait? If so, *self* is neither the author nor the depicted subject, but the viewer — the third term is included. The condition of discourse is not identity, rather, non-identity; negation is repetition and what is repeated is, precisely, an absence. Paolini's work does not represent, rather, it *presents*, or in other words, the continuous becoming of a possible space inhabited by appearance; here, artistic creation is not localised at the origin nor at the end, but is repeated at every encounter, or rather, in the activity of looking. The autonomy of the space of appearance here crystalises in the medium of photography: the power to be seen, not only read and heard; the power to figure, and not only to signify. The autonomy of the space of appearance is not isolated nor independent, it springs within the rapture between forms and grounds — a violence of artistic creation, where violence is a *release* that comes with acknowledgement: the acknowledgement is the release. The release of what, precisely? Of acknowledgment itself: the figural interfering with signification, in disturbing discourse, in excessing meaning. The space of appearance is a space of errantry, the resistance of reality to its representation. Paolini writes: "We might as well say it straight away: the artist does not know objects, does not see them; yet never before have so many objects crowded the everyday scene, saturating our field of vision. Who, then, is the artist, whether he wants to explain himself or not? Or, if you prefer, *where* are they, where has he hidden all these objects? The artist is someone who wanders around in a void without being able to give up describing it. His object is the transparent membrane, the intangible envelope of this void within which he finds itself. The object of its gaze, which has another gaze as its object. So objects do not exist, because things exist. Indeed, the thing. What thing? The thing itself!"[10]

[10] G. Paolini, *Idem*. Einaudi, Torino, 1975, pp. 44–45.

The activation of vision as reflexivity without closure — Paolini's work *makes us see* something about seeing *itself*: it is the event in which "it" encounters "self" in "itself." "What else is a drawing? (...) a bird's-eye view, or a vision with closed eyes; the smile that the acrobat displays at the most delicate moment of his performance, the ancient profile of ruins that seem to be both forming and remaining, the golden reflection on the fringes of the curtain that marks the anticipation of an event."[11]

Sensibility is distributed across a margin of indeterminacy. Through Lyotard's notion of double exteriority, Paolini's reactivation of Lotto shows that perception cannot coincide with itself: the given is not a text, it has a thickness or difference that cannot be read but can be sensed. Just like in the experience of a sunset, when it is not possible to identify the gap between one shade and the other that can nevertheless be sensed. In Giulio Paolini, what appears as representation is in fact a staging of non-identification. Reflexivity or mirrorism "is not the recourse of an aesthetics of imitation or materialism of reflection, where mimesis ultimately escalates in the theory of knowledge."[12] *To reflect* differs from *to think*, and "the mirror becomes a metaphor that encapsulates the mystery of depth, concealing manifestation."[13] Figure, exceeding perception, at the thresholds of discourse, is the rapture in the axiomatic of tensions, the discovery of a tropism whose center is distributed everywhere, in other words, a form of orientation where the sense of limits continually risks the rhythm of differentiation that swings between oceanic abandonment into

[11] G. Paolini, *Il luogo della rappresentazione* in Quaderni di Teatro, Einaudi, Torino, 1986, p. 65 part of the exhibition catalogue G. Celant (ed.) *Giulio Paolini 1960–1972*, Fondazione Prada, Milano, 2003
[12] J. F. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011, p. 27
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 28

non-containment and strong determinant identification.[14] In this sense, Paolini's work does not close the ecárt between discourse and figure, it inhabits it, dwelling in the rhythmic comma between discourse, figure.

[14] R. Smithson, *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects (1968),* Artforum September, 1968; "The rational critic of art cannot risk this abandonment into "oceanic" undifferentiation, he/she can only deal with the limits that come after this plunge into such a world of non-containment."